

An Orthodox Theory of Knowledge: The Epistemological and Apologetic Methods of the Church Fathers

Rev. Deacon Dr. Ananias Sorem

Christianity did not begin in the arms of philosophy. Christ did not walk through Palestine preaching natural law. The early Church was not a philosophical seminar. The Apostles did not embrace the bond of *fides et ratio*, faith and reason. The Christianity of the first half-millennium marginalized pagan Greek philosophical faith in reason. This Christianity turned to Jerusalem, not to Athens. Although this Church took terms and distinctions from pagan Greek philosophers, it did not ground its theology in their philosophy.¹

I. Natural Theology and the West

As we will see, with the West's embracing of the *Hellenistic* philosophic project² we begin to see the emergence of what is called Natural Theology,³ where Christianity is cast in a new light, taking on an identity of its own foreign to the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Faith.⁴ For the West, the project of Natural Theology (which is distinct from natural revelation) developed and arguably came to its climax with Thomas Aquinas. Natural Theology is typically defined as being what the human mind, by the "light of natural reason alone," can know about God apart from revelation. For Aquinas, as with most Natural Theologians, there is the implicit belief that certain truths about God (e.g. that God exists, that there is only one God, that He is Good, etc.) can be known and demonstrated by reason without first presupposing faith in divine revelation. As we will see, the natural theological project of the West makes an essential distinction between the nature of faith and reason, a distinction that depends on certain epistemological assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge in general. In drawing out the differences between the nature of faith and reason, Aquinas argues that the existence of God is not an article of faith but a *preambula* (a preamble) to the articles of faith.⁵ Consequently, natural knowledge is understood to be presupposed by faith, just as he believes nature is presupposed by grace.

These conclusions are the result of Aquinas' epistemology derive from a classical foundationalist view found in Aristotle. We will discuss classical foundationalist theories of knowledge in detail later, but for now it is enough to note that natural theology commits itself to a particular view where epistemic foundations for the justification of knowledge can exist and function independent (autonomous epistemology) from the epistemological presuppositions provided from divine revelation as the unique justification for human reason (theonomous epistemology). Although Aquinas acknowledges that the human's ability to reason and obtain truth depends on

¹ Engelhardt, *After God*, 216.

² The Church Father, Tertullian, in considering *what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem*, comments on Paul's writing, stating: "He had been at Athens, and had his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, whilst it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from "the porch of Solomon" [Acts 3:5] who had himself taught that "the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart" [Wis. 1:1]. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides." (Tertullian 1994, "On Prescription Against Heretics" VII, p. 246)

³ "Natural theology is a program of inquiry into the existence and attributes of God without referring or appealing to any divine revelation. In natural theology, one asks what the word "God" means, whether and how names can be applied to God, whether God exists, whether God knows the future free choices of creatures, and so forth. The aim is to answer those questions without using any claims drawn from any sacred texts or divine revelation, even though one may hold such claims." (<https://www.iep.utm.edu/theo-nat/#H2>)

⁴ For example, "Within Western Christian theology, God was regarded ever more as a philosophical idea, rather than the Person of the Father, Who begets the Son, and from Whom alone the Holy Spirit proceeds. God as the most personal of all was obscured through a theology with a robust philosophical overlay that rendered the theological approach to God primarily one of scholarship, not of prayerful ascetical struggle." (Engelhardt, *After God*, 35)

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pars. I, q.2, a.2.

God as cause, the preconditions for intelligibility need not be located in our presupposing God as the necessary justificatory condition for the possibility of knowledge. This conclusion derives from an epistemological/ontological⁶ distinction made in Aristotle between “what is better known by us” versus “what is better known by nature.”⁷ The idea here is that the natural order of our inquiry/knowledge is to start from the things which are more knowable and clear to us (e.g., sense perception) and to proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature (e.g., being, God, etc.).⁸ In other words, temporally speaking the effects are known first and then the cause, although in the real order of existence the cause (what is better known by nature) is always prior the effect (what is better known by us). Therefore, according to Natural Theology, the presuppositional first principles of epistemic foundations are not located in the cause but in the effects, that is, sense perception and what is declared to be self-evident (non-demonstrable) principles. However, as we will see, even if this distinction in the order of our knowing (proceeding from what is better known by us to the cause, i.e., what is better known by nature) turns out to be true, asserting this will become problematic, since the truth of this claim depends having already established that we can know this claim is true. This commits us to circular-reasoning and epistemic-bootstrapping. In other words, the method of discovering the truth of Aristotle’s distinction between “what is better known by us” versus “what is better known by nature” is suspect, and appealing to this epistemic principle will be fallacious, since it begs the question. If our reason and its processes are in question, we cannot use our reason (what is in question) to demonstrate how we know. Therefore, Natural Theology grants a pretended epistemic autonomy to those who do not presuppose their epistemic foundation in divine revelation, which assumes that there is an epistemic neutrality where one can in theory reason from sense experience and “self-evident” principles to certain conclusions and truths. However, as pointed out above and in what will be discussed in the later sections, a pretended epistemic autonomy whereby one grounds their epistemic starting points/first principles in either man or the world, apart from the presuppositions of a theonomous epistemology grounded in divine revelation, will beg the question and fail to establish a legitimate foundation for knowledge.

Natural theology, which is the *modus operandi* of the West, is a distinct project and differs significantly from the Eastern Orthodox understanding of “natural revelation” and the Orthodox’s *ordo theologiae*. Again, in the West, a pretended epistemic autonomy is granted to what is called “natural reason,” which is assumed to function properly by the light of the intellect alone. This is made explicit in John Paul II’s encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio*, when he declares that natural reason “depends upon sense perception and experience and which advances by the light of the intellect alone...”⁹ Not only does the Orthodox Church not grant a pretended epistemic autonomy to natural reason, it makes no separation between natural and supernatural revelation. For as Dumitru Staniloae states: “Natural revelation is known and understood fully in the light of supernatural revelation, or we might say that natural revelation is given and maintained by God continuously through his own divine act which is above nature. That is why Saint Maximos the Confessor does not posit an essential distinction between natural and the supernatural revelation or biblical one. According to him, this latter is only the embodying of the former in historical persons and actions.”¹⁰

Since Natural Theology is the study of what can be known about God from human reason alone and apart from revelation, it often attempts to show that certain truths about God are demonstrable by reason via *a posteriori* cosmological arguments. This results in an empirical theology that has been historically committed to a

⁶ God is the cause of us knowing, but our knowing is not dependent on us acknowledging God as the cause of our knowing. Therefore, it is said that in the real order of things (ontological) the cause is first, but in the temporal order of our knowing (epistemological) the effects are known first.

⁷ For more on Aristotle’s distinction on “What is Better Known by Us” vs. “What is better Known in Itself/by Nature” see Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* 71b32; *Prior Analytics* 68b35–7; *Physics* A.1, 184a16–20; *Metaphysics* Z.3, 1029b3–12; *Topics* Z.4, 141b2–142a12.

⁸ “The natural way of doing this is to start from the things which are more knowable and obvious to us and proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature; for the same things are not ‘knowable relatively to us’ and ‘knowable’ without qualifications. So in the present inquiry we must follow this method and advance from what is more obscure by nature, but clearer to us, towards what is more clear and more knowable by nature.” (Aristotle, *Physics* 184a15-21)

⁹ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Ch. 1, 8-9.

¹⁰ Dimitrie Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, 1.

Hellenistic philosophic and metaphysical program (a pagan Greek philosophical faith in reason), whose conclusions arrive not at the Christian God, but the Greek God of the philosophers. This is clearly stated in Aquinas who believes that those things about God arrived at by pagan Greek philosophy are in a sense also contained in Scripture insofar as Scripture speaks of many things which he believes could be discovered by natural human reason alone without God revealing them, or without natural revelation being grounded in supernatural revelation. For concerning Scripture, Aquinas states: “[I]t treats of Him not only so far as He can be known through creatures just as philosophers knew Him – ‘That which is known of God is manifest in them’ (Rom. I. 19)-- but also so far as He is known to Himself alone and revealed to others.”¹¹

By embracing *Hellenistic* philosophy, the West and Natural Theology as a whole, conceives God more as a philosophical concept,¹² God as substance (*ousia*) rather than person (*hypostasis*),¹³ and therefore differs substantially from the Eastern Orthodox Church in their *ordo theologiae*.¹⁴ This is why many writers have represented “ancient Greek thought as essentially ‘non-personal.’”¹⁵ However, unlike the followers of Natural Theology who invert the *ordo theologiae*, the Patristic and Orthodox method is to approach theological questions beginning with the persons Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, the same errors of *Hellenism* that the Fathers¹⁶ so ardently fought against, namely, ancient Greek ontology that considers the unity and ontology of God to consist in the *substance* of God end up being the same fundamental theological errors in the West. *Hellenistic* philosophy brings the West “back to the ancient Greek ontology: God is first God (His substance or nature, His being), and then exists as Trinity, that is, as persons.”¹⁷ Furthermore, having rejected the Orthodox doctrine of essence/energies, the West has no theological means of mediating God and man, save man’s philosophical ideas of God. Ultimately this adherence to ideas over personhood is what deprived the Christian West, at least theologically, of the experiential communion with the persons (*hypostases*) of God that is uniquely mediated through His divine energies. This amounted to the worshiping their idea of God rather than the persons of God Himself who exists first and foremost as hypostases of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit revealed in the mediating divine uncreated energies. Hence, Natural Theology by inverting the Patristic method of correct *ordo theologiae*, together with embracing the paradigms of Greek metaphysics and philosophy, is inevitably led to a scholasticism and rationalist theology that results in the worship of a generic idea of God, rather than the real persons (hypostasis) of as Holy Trinity through His divine energies. For it is the West’s adherence to the doctrine of *Absolute Divine Simplicity*, a conclusion derived from Natural Theology, to consider God as “a purely intellectual substance accessible to reason, possessing all perfections to an eminent degree, containing all ideas of all things, principle of every order and every reality...”¹⁸ However, without a correct *ordo theologiae*, whereby one’s epistemic principles are assumed within the divine revelation of the

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pars. I, q. 2, a. 6.

¹² “Within Western Christian theology, God was regarded ever more as a philosophical idea, rather than the Person of the Father, Who begets the Son, and from Whom alone the Holy Spirit proceeds. God as the most personal of all was obscured through a theology with a robust philosophical overlay that rendered the theological approach to God primarily one of scholarship, not of prayerful ascetical struggle.” (Engelhardt, *After God*, 35)

¹³ “When God was conversing with Moses, He did not say, ‘I am the essence’, but ‘I am the One Who is.’ Thus it is not the One Who is who derives from the essence, but essence which derives from Him, for it is He who contains all being in Himself.” (St. Gregory Palamas, *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, III.ii.12)

¹⁴ “*ordo theologiae*: Farrell emphasizes that the Patristic (that is, Orthodox) method for approaching theological questions is, in part, a faithful following of the correct order in which the theological questions themselves are posed. Orthodox Fathers of the Church begin with the persons Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; through his experience of God the illumined Father understands that he has not merged with the divine essence, because he knows he is in communion with a loving God; he has not become God.” (James Kelley, “Joseph P. Farrell: An Overview of the Theological Works”)

¹⁵ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 27.

¹⁶ The Church Father, Tertullian, in considering *what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem*, comments on Paul’s writing, stating: “He had been at Athens, and had his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, whilst it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon” [Acts 3:5] who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart” [Wis. 1:1]. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.” (Tertullian 1994, “On Prescription Against Heretics” VII, p. 246)

¹⁷ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 40.

¹⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 21.

Holy Trinity who reveals to us the Orthodox doctrine of the essence/energies distinction, one falls into the error of removing God from the world. For the idea of *absolute divine simplicity* concludes that God is not directly present in the world via His immanent uncreated activities (i.e., energies), leaving one with nothing more than a materialistic world of mechanistic causes presided over by an unknown and causally inert God – a generic deistic god that is conceived of as an idea, “a purely intellectual substance accessible to reason” and not immanent in the world and encountered through experience.¹⁹

Furthermore, if knowledge – as articulated by Aristotle and Aquinas – is always derived from sense-experience, including our knowledge of God, then it follows that none of these created effects amount to a real knowledge of God Himself, since on the Thomistic view, God’s essence is never accessed or experienced at all.²⁰ On this theological paradigm, one only knows a series of created causes. And if all we can ever know of God are His created causes in this life, then it should be expected that the Enlightenment would conclude that it makes no sense to believe in God, especially when one’s starting point for theology is empirical (i.e., Natural Theology) and grounded in an autonomous epistemology. Of course the Thomists will argue that we know God’s existence through the *analogia entis*, but this only further compounds the problem. For how could *a posteriori* empirical sense-experience ever provide evidence for a being that bears no real relation to the world of created being? According to Aquinas, God is an uncaused absolutely simple divine essence, which means that He is – as St. John of Damascus puts it – nothing like created being. In other words, there can be no similarity between the conditioned “being” of a created, temporal world and an uncreated, unconditioned eternal “Being.” Therefore, it is meaningless to use the phrase *analogia entis* to call God a first cause within the context of Aquinas’ theology. The Thomistic *analogia entis* has nothing to say about that which is wholly other, and therefore, it never bridges the impenetrable gap between *absolute divine simplicity* and created being. Now let us turn to consider Natural Theology’s connection to classical foundationalist epistemology.

II. The Epistemology of Classical Foundationalism

Classical foundationalist epistemology has its roots in Aristotle. It was Aristotle who argued that “not all knowledge is demonstrative” and that some knowledge must be “independent of demonstration.” Natural Theologians (e.g., Aquinas, et. al.) agree with the classical foundational epistemology of Aristotle, holding that all knowledge must rest on “first principles” or “self-evident truths.”²¹ Natural Theology in committing to a classical foundationalist model concerning epistemology assume two requirements regarding knowledge: (1) Our cognitive states are basic, that is, they possess some “positive epistemic status independently of their epistemic relations to any other cognitive states.” And, (2) “Every nonbasic cognitive state can possess positive epistemic status only because of the epistemic relations it bears, directly or indirectly, to basic cognitive states.”²²

Beyond the problems with the West’s Natural Theology project, found in the embracing of the *Hellenistic* pagan philosophical project with respect to epistemology, a project that inherits a pagan Greek philosophical faith in reason, there are problems with Natural Theology’s commitment to classical foundationalism. The

¹⁹ “At stake is a clash of moral and metaphysical worlds. Traditional Christianity is anchored in a noetic experience of the transcendent God to Whom all must conform in terms at odds with the morality and sentiments of secularity and modernity. Post-traditional Christianity, in contrast, has deep roots in the Western Christian Scholastic enterprise, which has from the Middle Ages sought to relocate the divine within the concerns of reason and of a natural law that can be understood in secular terms... This rationalistic, liberal understanding of religion looks to a unity in reason with the divine understood as a general principle or idea of giving direction to human aspirations.” (Englehardt, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, 149)

²⁰ Of course, there is the example of the incarnation, but explaining how the incarnation comes to be when committed to a doctrine of absolute divine simplicity becomes philosophically and theologically problematic.

²¹ Some “think all truths are demonstrable... assuming that there is no way of knowing other than by demonstration, maintain that an infinite regress is involved, on the ground that if behind the prior stands no primary, we could not know the posterior through the prior (wherein they are right, for one cannot traverse an infinite series)... Our own doctrine is that not all knowledge is demonstrative: on the contrary, knowledge of immediate premises is independent of demonstration. (The necessity of this is obvious; for since we must know the prior premises from which the demonstration is drawn, and since the regress must end in immediate truths, those truths must be indemonstrable).” (Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 72b5-23)

²² <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sellars/>

epistemology of classical foundationalism appears to be philosophically problematic, since it assumes there are nonconceptual ‘givens’ that serve as self-evident epistemic foundations/starting points for empirical knowledge. Often the classical foundationalist will argue for the epistemic justification of beliefs by reducing them to what are called basic beliefs.²³ For example, for the classical foundationalists of the Cartesian variety (e.g., rationalists as opposed to empiricists), self-evident epistemic foundations (basic beliefs/givens) are not grounded in empirical sense-data, but in other beliefs experienced within the mind. However, this type of classical foundationalist will have difficulties establishing how it is possible to justify beliefs concerning the external world (the material world) based on beliefs concerning the experienced states of the mind. Since, for Descartes, empirical knowledge is restricted to the subjective states of the mind. Therefore, the challenge and problem revolves around foundational beliefs and how to justify that foundations are in fact proper justifications. Since Rationalists will make innate self-evident *a priori* beliefs their foundations for epistemic justification for other beliefs, the justification for foundationalist principles or epistemic givens will ultimately be circular, since it will assume such epistemic basic beliefs justify one’s argument that they are foundational and epistemically basic. Likewise with the empiricists, they will make sense impressions their basic epistemic foundations. However, as Sellars points out, “Sensations are no more epistemic in character than are trees or tables, and are no more ineffable. They are private in the sense that only one person can notice them; but they are public in the sense that you can report, and can state the same facts about your sensations that I can report about my own.”²⁴ Furthermore, foundationalism of the empiricist variety will have the same problems and charges of circularity/question begging that the Rationalists do in their attempt provide justification for the justification criteria (e.g., having 1st principles located in sensation as epistemically given or basic) before establishing they are justified in making such arguments. Sellars qualifies what is meant by an epistemic “given” when he states: “The point of the epistemological category of the given is, presumably, to explicate the idea that empirical knowledge rests on a ‘foundation’ of non-inferential knowledge of matter of fact.”²⁵ Moreover, the nonconceptual content of sensory experience, appears to be incapable of justifying propositional or conceptual beliefs. Donald Davidson states:

The relation between sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes [that is, are not formulated in conceptual terms]. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in *this* sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs.²⁶

However, causation cannot provide adequate justification for beliefs. Causal explanations do not account for how or why a belief is justified.²⁷ For example, it certainly can be the case that *x* causes me to believe *y* at time *t* and it just so happens that *y* is true, but is it the case that I have knowledge that *y* is true at time *t*? Suppose that a wicked brain-surgeon *x* artificially induces belief *y* in me, which just so happen to be false. I would then have *x* causing me to believe *y* at time *t* while *y* is false. Since the brain-surgeon could of equally caused me to believe something true, the question immediately arises, how would I know *y* is true at time *t* if my knowledge is caused by *x*? The answer seems obvious: I would not. Therefore, causal explanations cannot provide us with an account of knowledge.

²³ “A particular belief is basic just in case it is epistemically justified and it owes its justification to something other than one’s other justified beliefs or their interrelations; a belief is nonbasic just in case it is epistemically justified but not basic. Foundationalists agree that if one has a nonbasic belief, then- at rock bottom-it owes its justification to at least one basic belief. There are justified beliefs because and only because there are basic beliefs. Such is the genus Foundationalism. One species is Experiential Foundationalism, the view that a basic belief can owe its justification to experience.” Daniel Howard-Snyder, “On an ‘Unintelligible’ Idea: Donald Davidson’s Case Against Experiential Foundationalism.” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* (2002), 523.

²⁴ Sellars, SRLG, 40.

²⁵ Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” I.3.

²⁶ Donald Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” 428.

²⁷ Davidson also agrees that “a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified.” (Ibid.)

III. Coherentism: The Theory-laden World and the Myth of the Given

Coherentism²⁸ is offered as a solution to the problems of foundationalism. Coherentism conceives of the structure of our knowledge and the nature of justification in terms of a holistic epistemological picture. Rather than having “basic or foundational and non-basic or derived beliefs,”²⁹ coherentism treats all our beliefs equally within our “web of beliefs.”³⁰ In “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” Quine gives us a clear idea of this epistemological view and explains the idea of a “web of beliefs.” He states that “the totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs... is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges.”³¹ This “fabric” or “web” of beliefs, according to Quine, is continually being revised in order to keep the edge of our conceptual scheme “squared with experience.”³² What we have in the coherentist theories of knowledge is an explicit rejection of what is called the “dogma of reductionism” found in classical foundationalist epistemologies. Quine, for example, makes this rejection explicit in his *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* and refers to the “dogma of reductionism” as the idea that with each statement there can be “associated a unique range of possible sensory events such that the occurrence of any of them would add to the likelihood of truth of the statement.”³³ Quine rejects such a conceptual interpretation and replaces it with the idea “that our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body.”³⁴ In other words, statements only have meaning within the greater “fabric” or “web” of beliefs and language structures. This reveals another further problem with Natural Theology, which assumes both a classical foundationalist epistemology and an evidentialist approach to facts and meanings. The error here, which the coherentist rightly points out, is to think that evidence, statements, meanings, and facts are all theory-independent and can be universally approached in a neutral manner, that is that there is neutral common ground whereby we can derive facts and theories, construct arguments, etc. It becomes clear, upon reflection, that what constitutes as evidence or facts will differ according to one’s own presuppositional commitments and determined by particular epistemic/theoretical paradigms. For example, the word “love” means something entirely different to the Orthodox Christian as opposed to the secularist who has a fundamentally different paradigm. Evidence will look very different to an atheist compared to a theist. These points echo the thoughts of Wilfrid Sellars who argued that despite receiving the same sense data, all seeing will be a seeing as, a seeing according to a concept³⁵ or the web of one’s own beliefs and theoretical commitments. What we can learn to appreciate from the coherentist (epistemic holism) theories, is that there are no theory-independent observations or meanings. All observations, therefore, are theory-contaminated/theory-laden and there are no basic meanings or epistemic givens.³⁶ We have similar arguments found in the Duhem-Quine thesis of the underdetermination of data for scientific theories. The basic idea of the underdetermination of scientific theory by evidence is that the available evidence at any given time will be insufficient for determining what theory or beliefs we should adopt. In other words, given a “choice between two theories or two ways of revising our beliefs,” we will be

²⁸ “According to coherentism about epistemic justification, beliefs are justified “holistically” rather than in a linear, piecemeal way. Each belief is justified by virtue of its coherence with the rest of what one believes—in other words, by virtue of belonging to a coherent set or web of beliefs. The coherentist avoids the appearance of vicious circularity by insisting that one needn’t *first* have justification for believing the other propositions in one’s belief system.” (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justep-foundational/>)

²⁹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justep-coherence/>

³⁰ See Quine and Ullian 1970, cf. Neurath 1983/1932 and Sosa 1980.

³¹ Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” 42.

³² Ibid., 44.

³³ Ibid. 40.

³⁴ Ibid., 41.

³⁵ Kant himself touches on this same idea when states: “thoughts without content are empty, and intuitions without concepts are blind. It is, therefore, just as necessary to make our concepts sensible, that is, to add the object to them in intuition, as to make our intuitions intelligible, that is, to bring them under concepts.” (Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, [A51/B76])

³⁶ The idea of an epistemic “given” often depends on the sense-datum theory, which is explained in the famous quote from H.H. Price: “When I see a tomato there is much that I can doubt ... One thing however I cannot doubt: that there exists a red patch of a round and somewhat bulgy shape, standing out from a background of other colour-patches, and having a certain visual depth, and that this whole field of colour is presented to my consciousness ...” (Price 1932: 3)

unable to determine what theory to choose based on the “evidence,” and therefore our theory will be underdetermined is *transiently* underdetermined simply by the evidence *at present*, or *permanently* underdetermined by *all possible* evidence.³⁷ This relates to our epistemological concerns, since within the epistemological program, as Quine himself addresses, two divisions have been made: divisions into the ‘conceptual’ (concerning meaning) and the ‘doctrinal’ (concerning truth).

We have already addressed the issue of the *conceptual reduction* project above, which we have found to be problematic on the grounds that statements and words only have their meaning within the greater “fabric” or “web” of beliefs and language structures or paradigms. The *doctrinal reduction* project, on the other hand, is concerned with “whether our knowledge of external physical things can be adequately justified on the basis of purely ‘sensory’ knowledge.”³⁸ This relates specifically to the issue of justification within epistemology. However, as coherentists³⁹ will argue: it is impossible to validate either science or epistemological theories as true by deducing them from empirical sensory experiences. Not only did Hume adequately show this by offering his problem of induction, Sellars provides his own critique of the sense-datum theorists in his myth of the given.⁴⁰ Sense-datum theorists, as James O’Shea discusses, “were generally concerned to defend the idea of an *epistemic* given, which... requires that the given be the sort of thing that can provide foundational evidence for our claims concerning how matters stand in the world.”⁴¹ And as Sellars’ critique shows, no item of empirical knowledge can serve the function of an epistemic given, which provides the crushing blow to classical foundationalism, and consequently, Natural Theology.

Although coherentist theories bear some resemblance to an Eastern Orthodox approach, there will nevertheless be fundamental problems with these autonomous epistemological theories as well. For instance, in critiquing classical foundationalism, coherentism doesn’t actually escape the real foundational issue and problem at all. It merely offers another “version of foundationalism that holds all beliefs to be foundational.” Furthermore, coherentism’s attempts to skirt the problem of circularity will be unsatisfactory, since if no belief in the web of the language structures or paradigms is justified to begin with, then what will make the whole paradigm justified? As Michael Depaul points out: “we might say that coherentism seems about as likely to succeed as

³⁷ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-underdetermination/>

³⁸ Stroud, “Naturalized Epistemology,” 222.

³⁹ As Donald Davidson states: “[w]hat distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for a belief except another belief.” (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Knowledge and Truth,” in *Truth and Interpretation*)

⁴⁰ Wilfrid Sellars’s argument for the given is a myth, from “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”:

1. A cognitive state is epistemically independent if it possesses its epistemic status independently of being inferred or inferable from some other cognitive state. [Definition of epistemic independence]
2. A cognitive state is epistemically efficacious – is capable of epistemically supporting other cognitive states – if the epistemic status of those other states can be validly inferred (formally or materially) from its epistemic status. [Definition of epistemic efficacy]
3. The doctrine of the given is that any empirical knowledge *that p* requires some (or is itself) basic, that is, epistemically independent, knowledge (*that g, h, i, ...*) which is epistemically efficacious with respect to *p*. [Definition of doctrine of the given]
4. Inferential relations are always between items with propositional form [By nature of inference]
5. Therefore, non-propositional items (such as sense data) are epistemically inefficacious and cannot serve as what is given. [From 2 and 4]
6. No inferentially acquired, propositionally structured mental state is epistemically independent. [From 1]
7. Examinations of multiple candidates for non-inferentially acquired, propositionally structured cognitive states indicates that their epistemic status presupposes the possession by the knowing subject of other empirical knowledge, both of particulars and of general empirical truths. [From Sellars’s analyses of statements about sense-data and appearances in Parts I-IV of EPM and his analysis of epistemic authority in Part VIII]
8. Presupposition is an epistemic and therefore an inferential relation. [Assumed (see PRE)]
9. Non-inferentially acquired empirical knowledge that presupposes the possession by the knowing subject of other empirical knowledge is not epistemically independent. [From 1, 7, and 8]
10. Any empirical, propositional cognition is acquired either inferentially or non-inferentially. [Excluded middle]
11. Therefore, propositionally structure cognitions, whether inferentially or non-inferentially acquired, are never epistemically independent and cannot serve as the given. [6, 9, 10, constructive dilemma]
12. Every cognition is either propositionally structured or not. [Excluded middle]
13. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that no item of empirical knowledge can serve the function of a given. [5, 11, 12, constructive dilemma]

(<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sellars/>)

⁴¹ James O’Shea, *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn*, 111.

a bucket brigade that does not end at a well, but simply moves around in a circle.”⁴² The problem is one of determining our epistemic criterion for justification before we can determine our criterion for justification, which is not possible. This turns our attention, therefore, to transcendental arguments.

IV. Transcendental Arguments

What are Transcendental Arguments? When we consider the existence of knowledge, facts, the validity of logic and arguments, conclusions derived from experience, an important question arises for the reflective inquirer. How does one determine that human reason, unaided by any other powers, can actually accomplish what it sets out to do, that is, to know reality and what is true? In other words, within the sphere of human reason alone, can we ever determine whether knowledge exists?⁴³ Since everyone presupposes something, a precommitment in using logic, reason, evidence, arguments, etc., there is no one who is presuppositionally neutral when it comes to factual questions and experience. Consequently, the use of reason, logic, evidence, arguments, etc. is not something proven by experience or reason.⁴⁴ It is that by which one proceeds to prove everything else. What we find in such an analysis is that rather than proving facts, one inevitably begs the question. Therefore, two questions immediately arise: (1) what are the necessary preconditions of intelligibility, science, logic, experience, and morality that must be presupposed to ground and justify the use of reason, logic, evidence, arguments, etc., and (2) can human reason, when isolated solely within its own space of reason, ever determine whether its processes are legitimate such that we can know anything at all without falling into the vicious circularity of epistemic bootstrapping?

Since the use of reason, logic, evidence, arguments, etc. is not something proven by experience or deduction, but that by which one proceeds to prove everything else, the task of discovering the necessary conditions for the possibility of knowledge lies within in the domain of transcendental arguments. Transcendental arguments, first coined by Kant in the transcendental deduction of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, are arguments attempting to establish the transcendental conditions for the possibility of knowledge. For Kant, this is the mind’s attempt to establish a conclusion, not by means of deduction, but rather to arrive at a conclusion transcendently,⁴⁵ that is, the process whereby one shows that if the conclusion is not true, knowledge itself would not be possible.⁴⁶ This is an essential feature of transcendental arguments. In other words, the form of a transcendental argument is as follows: X is a necessary condition for the possibility of Y, such that Y cannot obtain without X. Furthermore, given that X would be a condition for Y, it is said that the claim ($Y \supset X$) is not merely an *a posteriori* necessary truth established according to natural laws governing our actual world, but that it is an *a priori* and metaphysical necessary truth. In other words, the truth of this claim is not discovered through experience by the empirical sciences (e.g. $\text{water} = \text{H}_2\text{O}$)⁴⁷, but rather this truth holds metaphysically such that X is a condition for Y in every possible world. Therefore, the claim made by transcendental arguments, that X is a condition for Y,

⁴² “Coherentism” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 134.

⁴³ “One may be tempted here to respond that, because no counter example can be imagined, the universality of logic is undeniable. But, does the mere fact that we are psychologically so disposed that we cannot think of the world in other than logical categories, justify us in concluding that the world is bound by those categories? Why should we think our psychological limitations are descriptive of the entire universe? A psychological inability to modify the way we think about the universality of logic does not prove it is in fact universal. It merely means we cannot modify the way we think about it.” (Russell M. Manion, “The Contingency of Knowledge and Revelatory Theism.”)

⁴⁴ As Clement of Alexandria points out, “If anyone should suggest that scientific knowledge is provable by the help of reason, he must realize that the first principles are not able to be proved.... By faith alone is it possible to arrive at the first principle of the universe.” (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, Bk. II, Ch. 4, 13.4-14.1)

⁴⁵ A transcendental argument is, according to Kant, “one that proves a conclusion by showing that unless it were true, experience itself would be impossible.” (Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 380)

⁴⁶ Karl Popper, following Kant, states that a transcendental argument is An argument which appeals to the fact that we possess knowledge or that we can learn from experience, and which concludes from this fact that knowledge or learning from experience must be possible, and further, that every theory which entails the impossibility of knowledge, or of learning from experience, must be false, may be called a ‘transcendental argument’.” An argument which appeals to the fact that we possess knowledge or that we can learn from experience, and which concludes from this fact that knowledge or learning from experience must be possible, and further, that every theory which entails the impossibility of knowledge, or of learning from experience, must be false, may be called a ‘transcendental argument’.” (“The Logic of Scientific Discovery” p.368 footnote)

⁴⁷ See Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (1972) on *a posteriori* necessity vs. logical or metaphysical necessity.

amounts to ‘X is a necessary condition for Y,’⁴⁸ and this necessary condition possesses modal strength. Within transcendental arguments, not only is X a necessary condition for human reason or thought, it is a necessary condition for the *possibility* of human reason. For even if there were no human thought or reason in existence, X would still have to exist, since X is a necessary condition for the logical possibility of human thought at all. Therefore, according to S5 modal logic, we can ascribe modal operators to our premises when formally representing our transcendental argument (where \Box = necessarily, and \Diamond = possibly) in the following valid deductive syllogism:

1. $\Diamond Y$
2. $\Box(\Diamond Y)$ [from (1) and axiom 5]
3. $\Box(\Diamond Y \supset X)$ [transcendental premise]
4. So, $\Box(\Diamond Y) \supset \Box X$ [from (3) and axiom K]
5. Therefore, $\Box X$ [from (2) and (4)]

As James Anderson points out in constructing a transcendental argument according to S5 modal logic (as seen above), when the transcendental premise (3) is expressed as a claim about a necessary condition for the possibility of human thought, then the transcendental argument delivers its conclusion that X is not only transcendentally necessary, but that it is “necessary in the broad logical sense as well.”⁴⁹ This provides one with the strongest type of transcendental argument. We will return to this logical formulation of the transcendental argument when we consider the transcendental argument for the existence of God.

The Transcendental Argument for the Existence of God (TAG), not to be confused with a God-of-the-gaps argument (a fallacy), simply removes all objections and excuses for not believing in God. TAG is a presuppositional argument and critiques the presuppositions of other world views. Again, since everyone presupposes something (e.g., a precommitment in using logic, reason, evidence, making arguments, etc.), there is no one who is presuppositionally neutral when it comes to factual questions and experience (as Natural Theology/classical foundationalism would have it). As stated earlier, the use of reason, logic, evidence, arguments is not something proven by experience. It is that by which one proceeds to prove everything else. However, one nevertheless has to ground and justify that reason, logic, and arguments work and are valid operations for what they think these operations can obtain and establish (this is a meta-logical analysis). The problem is that man, locked within his own sphere of reason, cannot appeal to what is in question (i.e., reason, logic, and arguments) to establish that reason, logic, and arguments are valid and work. This would be to engage in the fallacy of circular reasoning (“question begging”) and epistemic bootstrapping. A Transcendental Argument, therefore, attempts to discover the preconditions for the possibility of reason, logic, and argumentation. It does this by taking some aspect of human rationality and investigates what must be true (i.e., the necessary condition) in order for valid rational processes to be possible. Again, as we have seen, transcendental arguments typically have the following form: For x to be the case, y must also be the case, since y is the precondition (or the necessary condition) of x. And given x is the case, y is the case.

What the TAG demonstrates is that there is only one unique condition that will satisfy the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, rationality, logic, and arguments. The necessary precondition (what must be presupposed) in order to have knowledge, logic, and arguments is the Orthodox Christian notion of God as He has revealed Himself to us (revelation therefore is required since we are unable to get out of the epistemic

⁴⁸ “The first, and perhaps most definitive feature, is that these arguments involve a claim of a distinctive form: namely, that one thing (X) is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else (Y), so that (it is said) the latter cannot obtain without the former. In suggesting that X is a condition for Y in this way, this claim is supposed to be metaphysical and a priori, and not merely natural and a posteriori: that is, if Y cannot obtain without X, this is not just because certain natural laws governing the actual world and discoverable by the empirical sciences make this impossible (in the way that, for example, life cannot exist without oxygen), but because certain metaphysical constraints that can be established by reflection make X a condition for Y in every possible world (for example, existence is a condition of thought, as the former is metaphysically required in order to do or be anything at all).” (Stern, *Toward a Transcendental Argument*, 3)

⁴⁹ James Anderson, “No Dilemma for the Proponent of the Transcendental Argument: A Response to David Reiter,” *Philosophia Christi*, 11.

quagmire of circularity). In other words, the TAG argues from the impossibility of the contrary. The contrary of Orthodox Christianity (any view that denies the Orthodox Christian view of God) is shown to be impossible. And if the negation of Orthodox Christianity is false, then Orthodox Christianity is proved true. That is to say, the structure of the argument is a disjunctive syllogism. Either A or not-A; not-not-A; therefore A. Consequently, if TAG establishes that Orthodox Christianity is the necessary conceptual precondition for rationality, logic, and argumentation, then it follows that we must hold (presuppose) the Orthodox Christian worldview as it has been revealed to us in order to be rational. Furthermore, if someone refuses to accept the Orthodox Christian worldview or God's existence, then they have no foundation for rationality and, without such a foundation, they have no rational basis for mounting an objection against TAG or the conclusion of TAG, that the Orthodox notion of God (which is not a generic theistic notion of God, but a personal God unique only to Orthodoxy, the only condition that satisfies the demands set out) does not exist. Therefore, the God of Orthodoxy exists.

Again, obtaining the necessary conditions for the possibility of knowledge cannot be logically or epistemically contingent upon logical or epistemological arguments, since this would result in question begging and amount to epistemic-bootstrapping. Neither would the veracity of the claim that such and such conditions are necessary for the possibility of knowledge (if they are the necessary conditions) be dependent upon logic, arguments, or syllogistic demonstrations. For what is being sought and identified is not being carried out in a logical or epistemological analysis, but rather a meta-logical or meta-epistemological analysis. We are seeking the proper epistemic grounds that would make logic, arguments, syllogisms, and reason possible. Therefore, the necessary conditions that would provide justification for our knowledge must be both metaphysically and epistemically prior to epistemology and arguments. Nevertheless, once such conditions are obtained, which would ground and justify the use of logic and arguments, this does not prevent one from recursively/retroactively formulating the argument in syllogistic form to pedagogically illustrate the transcendental argument made, if one acknowledges that the truth of the conclusion of the argument is not dependent on the argument itself but rather what is prior to the argument.

Therefore, a transcendental argument for the existence of God can be formulated in two syllogisms to illustrate that God is the necessary condition for the possibility of reason and experience. The first is a *modus ponens* syllogism:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. $Y \supset X$ (Modus Ponens) $\frac{Y}{X}$ | 1. If (knowledge and experience exist), then God exists $\frac{\text{(knowledge and experience exist)}}{\text{Therefore, God exists}}$ |
|--|---|

This can be translated into the modal argument form constructed earlier:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. $\Box(\Diamond Y) \supset \Box X$ $\frac{\Box(\Diamond Y)}{\Box X}$ | 1. If necessarily (the possibility of knowledge), then necessarily God $\frac{\text{Necessarily (the possibility of knowledge)}}{\text{Therefore, necessarily God exists}}$ |
|---|--|

Since one can question whether the existence of God (Y) is in fact a necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge and experience (X), as opposed to something else that would satisfy for the necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge, we form the second argument (disjunctive syllogism):

- | | |
|--|--|
| 2. $A \vee \neg A$ (Disjunctive) $\frac{\neg(\neg A)}{A}$ | 2. Either God is a nec. cond. (A) or not (God) [$\neg A$] is nec. cond. $\frac{\text{not (not God } [\neg A])}{\text{Therefore, God is a necessary condition for knowledge}}$ |
|--|--|

Of course, we will need to see why God satisfies the necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge, and why the variety of other possible preconditions would not satisfy. This is to return to our previous analysis. For what the history of philosophy and epistemology teaches us is that man isolated within his own sphere reason and committed to an autonomous epistemology, apart from theistic revelation, cannot justify the existence of knowledge or establish whether his rational processes are legitimate.⁵⁰ Tragically, man in his pretended autonomy and rebellion against God is incapable of knowing “the nature of himself, logic, the world, universals, or how they all are, or could be, related. In short he cannot attain a coherent theory of knowledge. Consequently, no beliefs can be justified, and no beliefs can attain to the level of knowledge.”⁵¹ As St. Justin Popovich explains: “There is an unbridgeable gulf between man and truth. Man is on one side of this gulf and can find no way of getting to the other, where transcendent Truth is to be found.”⁵² Reason, unaided or helped in some way, is incapable of determining whether its processes are legitimate and whether it can know anything at all. Hence, human reason requires the help of the divine (i.e., supernatural assistance by grace) through faith, and it is this faith that allows the participant to receive knowledge as a gift from God. This knowledge both surpasses the limits of philosophy (human reason) and grounds (and justifies) the existence of knowledge arrived at by means of the human intellect. As St. Justin Popovich explains:

[T]he power of Truth, from the other side, responds to the powerlessness of man on this side. Transcendent Truth crosses the gulf, arrives on our side of it and reveals Itself—Himself—in the person of Christ, the God-man. In Him transcendent Truth becomes immanent in man. The God-man reveals the truth in and through Himself. He reveals it, not through thought or reason, but by the life that is His. He not only has the truth, He is Himself the Truth. In Him, Being and Truth are one. Therefore He, in His person, not only defines Truth but shows the way to it: he who abides in Him will know the Truth, and the Truth will make him free (cf. John 8:32) from sin, falsehood, and death.⁵³

The solution to our epistemic predicament, which man’s autonomous reason cannot obtain within its own sphere of reasoning, is a truth that is both personal and obtained through living a life of faith in humility, by abiding in the only one who is in a position to know the Truth. By uniting one’s self to Christ in this way man can achieve true knowledge. For since in “the person of the God-man, God and man are indissolubly united,”⁵⁴ the gulf between man and truth becomes bridged. Through the *theoanthropos* our intellects are “renewed, purified and sanctified... deepened and divinized and made capable of grasping the truths of life in the light of God-made-man. In the God-man, absolute Truth has in its entirety been given in a real and personal way.”⁵⁵

Therefore, the only condition that will satisfy the possibility of knowledge and bridge the gulf between man and truth is the unique idea of God coherently articulated in the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church who has preserved the correct doctrine of God received in divine revelation⁵⁶ from the Holy Trinity. For only in the Orthodox doctrine of God will we see that God (the necessary condition) is rational, omniscient, transcendent, non-contingent (necessary), intentional in His creation (as opposed to creation being accidental), a personal and communal being (having *perichoresis* within His Trinity), having divine uncreated energies distinct from the common essence, who becomes incarnate as the God-man (the only one that can bridge the epistemic gap), sends His Holy Spirit to illumine and solve man's epistemic predicament, and reveals these truths to His

⁵⁰ “You may recognize this as a simple disjunctive syllogism. Given that knowledge is possible at all, Theonomous Epistemology and Autonomous Epistemology are antithetical systems. One must be true and one must be false. If one is false, then the other is true. We have seen that, in principle, Autonomous Epistemology is not possible. On this premise all facts and all experience are unintelligible. Therefore, we must conclude that the precondition to knowledge, to science, and to philosophy is the existence of God and the veracity of his revelation.” (Russell M. Manion, “The Contingency of Knowledge and Revelatory Theism.”)

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² St. Justin Popovich, “The Theory of Knowledge of St. Isaac the Syrian,” 68.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “God is the Lord and has revealed Himself to us; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Psalm 117:27,26).

Apostles and set up One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church⁵⁷ to preserve this revelation unchanged and handed down to the faithful, not only to solve our epistemic predicament but save us from death and the devil. These conditions are only to be uniquely found in the Orthodox Church who provides us with a coherent picture of who God is and how we get to know Him. Furthermore, upon reflection, one will see that without this, we will be left in the same epistemic predicament as outlined earlier with the various autonomous epistemologies, and consequently, we will have no justification for the existence of knowledge. Therefore, we must presuppose⁵⁸ the God who is “the Lord and has revealed Himself to us”⁵⁹ as the necessary foundation and precondition of knowledge in order to possess any knowledge at all. In presupposing God as the necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge man surrenders his “autonomy to the revelation of God, not as a conclusion that has met the standards of his epistemological criterion, but as the foundation and precondition of the epistemological criterion itself. Without a revelation from God, we cannot know that all the objects of the world are rationally related and that our attributes are appropriate to know it.”⁶⁰ This turns our consideration to presuppositional apologetics.

V. What is Presuppositional Apologetics?

Although the concept, its use, and application in Christian apologetics goes back to the Apostles and the early Church Fathers, the phrase ‘presuppositional apologetics’ was first popularized with the work of Dutch Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til and his students Greg Bahnsen and John Frame. Although there were certain problems with these Calvinist presuppositional apologetics due to their Reformed theology and particular conception of God, there are no doubt similarities to the apologetic methods of the Church Fathers, which they most certainly borrowed from. Therefore, it is worth taking a look at what is meant by presuppositional apologetics and how it differs from classical Western and evidentialist approaches. Presuppositional apologetics, first and foremost rejected the idea common to most apologists who assumed there could be a neutral, autonomous epistemic position when confronting unbelief or a neutral starting point from which their opponent could argue against the existence of God – a denial of classical foundationalism. In contrast to the natural theology of the evidentialist apologists that granted a pretended epistemic autonomy to their opponents, Van Til argued that since God is the ultimate epistemological starting point, there can be no arguments for the Christian faith derived from something other than faith itself and what is received from divine revelation. Since divine revelation shows that God’s authority is ultimate, any attempt to argue for the Christian faith on another authority over and above God’s is, as Van Til points out, to concede that there is in fact a higher authority than God himself. This, however, would need to be shown; and since, any attempt to argue for an authority higher than God would be self-defeating, man must resign from a commitment to an autonomous epistemology and presuppose the truth of the Christian faith as the very foundation for epistemology. Therefore, *contra* Natural Theology, Russell Manion summarizes:

God is proven, not as the conclusion of rational or empirical theistic arguments, but as the very ground of argument itself. It is with the surrender to God’s view of Himself, the world, and ourselves that one can articulate a coherent theory of knowledge. God’s revelation is not validated by some autonomous epistemology. Rather, our epistemology

⁵⁷ “For Irenaeus’ idea that the Church is the repository of truth: ‘Since therefore we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek the truth among others which it is easy to obtain from the Church.’ (AH, III.IV.1). This also points towards a methodological principle for apologetics beings especially grounded in the Church.” (Fr. Joshua Shoop, *Irenaeus and Orthodox Apologetic Methodology: A Neoplatonic Presuppositionalism*, footnote, 76)

⁵⁸ “We argue, therefore, by ‘presupposition.’ The Christian, as did Tertullian, must contest the very principles of his opponent’s position. The only ‘proof’ of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of ‘proving’ anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of ‘proof’ itself.” (Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*)

⁵⁹ Psalm 117:27.

⁶⁰ Russell M. Manion, *The Contingency of Knowledge and Revelatory Theism* (1999).

is validated by the revelation of God and the story contained in that revelation. God's revelation is self-authenticating, because, by it, everything else is authenticated.⁶¹

VI. Conclusion: Presuppositional Apologetics in the Church Fathers

Not only do we find a different epistemic system in the Fathers from the epistemic principles of Natural Theology and classical foundationalism, the mode of apologetics is significantly different as well. As we had mentioned earlier, an Orthodox theory of knowledge has more similarities in common with the coherentist theories than the foundationalist epistemologies. Consequently, the apologetic methods will resemble “a method common to all forms of Presuppositional Apologetic methodology, which is to say that of whole-system destruction. For example, as Bahnsen observes of Van Til's methodology: ‘entire systems are in opposition.’⁶²”⁶³ Here systems has the connotation of a paradigm, deriving from the Greek συστηματικός, meaning “of or like an organized whole.”⁶⁴ Father Joshua Shooping explains that in “the present context, then, a ‘system’ can be understood as that wherein elements cohere, at least in ‘intention,’ such that what is at the end aligns holistically with what is at the beginning and also with what is in the middle.”⁶⁵ This is why Florovsky, concerning the view of the Fathers, states that the “truth was, according to St. Irenaeus, a ‘well-grounded system, a *corpus* (*adv. haeres.* II. 27. I – *veritatis corpus*), a ‘harmonious melody’ (II. 38. 3).”⁶⁶ Therefore, the Fathers – like Irenaeus – not only conceive of heretical positions as systems/paradigms (albeit incoherent paradigms) *in toto*, having false presuppositional starting points (*canons* of truth⁶⁷), they consider the Orthodox faith and dogmatics as a coherent system capable of destroying other systems in opposition to it. For as Shooping points out concerning the Fathers' view of the system of faith, “not only does it offer constructive demonstration and proof of fundamentals of the Christian system[e.g. *transcendental arguments*],⁶⁸ but is also offensive insofar as it seeks, as a true system, to put the whole of a false system into view so as to destroy it *in toto*, as one whole in opposition to another whole.”⁶⁹ Therefore, we are presented with our disjunctive argument once again, which states, as Bahnsen points out: “Either one holds the entire system of orthodox Christianity... or one denies the entire system.”⁷⁰ However, in denying the system of the Orthodox Faith, one is led to an incoherent account of both the world and knowledge and thus one's position becomes self-stultifying.. For by exploring the question, “What is the foundation of the intellect and of knowledge?”, we find, as St. Justin Popovich explains, that man in his pretended epistemic autonomy, “tries to explain himself in terms of things, but with a total lack of success, for by explaining himself in terms of things, man in the end is reduced to a thing himself, to matter... By attempting to explain man by man, philosophy achieves a bizarre result: it presents a mirror image of a mirror image. In the last analysis, such philosophy, whatever its path, is centered on matter and on man. And one thing follows from all this: the impossibility of any true knowledge of man or of the world.”⁷¹ On the other hand, having our epistemological first principles, which are presupposed as the necessary conditions for knowledge, placed within what St. Irenaeus calls the *canon* of truth found in Christ,⁷² the Orthodox Faith not only securely obtains the only condition for possibility of knowledge, Orthodoxy provides a coherent account of God, man, and the world. Therefore, if knowledge is at all possible, then the theonomous epistemology of the Orthodox Church and autonomous epistemology are antithetical systems, whereby one

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Van Til's *Apologetic*, 268.

⁶³ Fr. Joshua Shooping, *Irenaeus and Orthodox Apologetic Methodology: A Neopatristic Presuppositionalism*, 69.

⁶⁴ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

⁶⁵ Fr. Joshua Shooping, *Irenaeus and Orthodox Apologetic Methodology: A Neopatristic Presuppositionalism*, 71.

⁶⁶ Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, 79.

⁶⁷ Irenaeus would likely refer to the *canon* of truth, for it is this *canon* which integrates the ‘tiles’ into the proper ‘mosaic.’ (Fr. Joshua Shooping, *Irenaeus and Orthodox Apologetic Methodology: A Neopatristic Presuppositionalism*, 71.

⁶⁸ Italics mine.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁰ Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til*, 263.

⁷¹ St. Justin Popovich, “The Theory of Knowledge of Saint Isaac the Syrian,” *Man and the God-Man*, 68.

⁷² “As an epistemological consideration, however, Christ seems to function as an *epistemological* first principle. Thus it seems that the Father functions as Irenaeus' metaphysical or ontological first principle, the one on which his metaphysical system is established, whereas Christ as an epistemological first principle reveals that which is ontologically (though not chronologically) prior.” (Joshua Schooping, *Irenaeus and Orthodox Apologetic Methodology: A Neopatristic Presuppositionalism*, 75.

must be true and the other false. Since, having shown that the systems of autonomous epistemology are not possible,⁷³ we must conclude that the only precondition to knowledge is the existence of God and the veracity of His revelation as delivered “once for all to the saints”⁷⁴ and preserved in the Orthodox Church.

⁷³ By placing our faith in an autonomous epistemology (in things outside of God or within the isolated sphere of reason alone), we separate ourselves from our understanding. For as St. Justin Popovich goes on to explain, in doing this, we see ourselves and our own minds “as the chief fount of truth and the highest measure of all that is, attributing all worth to it, making it an absolute and idolizing it, while at the same time belittling the other psychic and physical powers of man,” (St. Justin Popovich, “The Theory of Knowledge of Saint Isaac the Syrian,” *Man and the God-Man*, 67) which “drags the understanding, and man with it, down to the level of the senses”, and invalidates any possibility of knowledge.

⁷⁴ Jude 1:3